



## Farm Safety, Health, and Wellness Resource: Mental Health Case Studies

### The Family Vegetable Farm in Roanoke, Virginia

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These case studies are tools to help extension agents and other health care professionals identify common stressors among the farming community. Our case studies aim to bring awareness to problems Virginia farmers face and to promote appropriate problem-solving in coping with mental health issues. We hope the farming community will utilize these tools to build their knowledge about mental health and the mental health resources available to them. Our goal is to educate farmers, farm families, and extension professionals about farm stress and mental health resources in order to improve mental health within the farming community. We have incorporated discussion questions throughout the case studies to allow readers to practice applying their knowledge of stressors, symptoms, appropriate referrals and treatment strategies.

### Instructions

Read the case study thoroughly. When you get to a superscript in the passage, refer to the corresponding discussion questions located on the right side of the page. Take a few minutes to think about the question and answer it thoughtfully. We suggest you write down your answers and/or discuss them with peers. After you feel that each question has been appropriately addressed, continue reading the case study until you reach another superscript and repeat the processes explained above. For further reflection on the questions, you may refer to our discussion at the end of the case study. The discussion is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers.



## The Family Vegetable Farm in Roanoke, Virginia

Danny and Catherine are the owners of a small diversified vegetable farm in Roanoke Virginia. They have two active boys, Michael and Jack who are currently in high school. Danny and Catherine made the move to the outskirts of Roanoke a few years ago and are currently in the first five years of their operation. Due to the recent drought, the last few months have been challenging for the entire family. These circumstances have placed pronounced stress on the family. They feel they must make up for the financial losses now that conditions appear to be improving.

It is a typical Monday morning for the family. Catherine wakes up, gets the boys off to school and heads to the hospital for her nursing shift in the emergency room. After an emotionally taxing day at work, she comes home to a house that needs to be cleaned and a hungry family. Catherine enjoys caring for her family, and comforts herself with the knowledge that Danny spends countless hours on the farm and that Michael and Jack are young growing boys who keep busy with their studies. Unfortunately, due to the family business struggling, Catherine has had to spend any free time she may have in the afternoons on the farm. Temporarily, she has taken up the role of production manager while Danny's dedicates himself to sales and marketing until the business gets back on its feet.

Weeks go by and conditions remain the same. Catherine is picking up the extra slack whenever she can which has affected her physically and emotionally. Recently she has been struggling to get out of bed and has been reprimanded at the hospital for making careless mistakes. Michael and Jack begin noticing that their mom has not been the same recently. She has lost a noticeable amount of weight and appears distant and short tempered.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing Catherine's sacrifice and seeing how the business is affecting the family, the boys decide to take matters into their own hands. Michael, being the oldest, feels immense pressure to step up, causing him to put more on his plate than he can handle. Deep down, Danny knows that his sons do not have enough experience. He feels worried and guilty because he is allowing them use machinery and tractors that he cannot afford to keep up to date, increasing their risk of injury. Catherine becomes frustrated and angry at Danny because he is letting the boys complete jobs that are far too risky on equipment that is

### 1 Discussion:

1. What are some of Danny's and Catherine's current stressors?
2. How can Catherine and Danny better communicate to discuss expectations and roles?
3. What are some examples of how Catherine is not acting like herself? What might indicate that Danny is feeling overburdened and unwell?

not safe. This creates marital issues between the two, leading to increased tension in the house.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to selling produce at farmers markets and to local restaurants, the family farm is financed by customers' purchase of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares. These markets have given Danny the opportunity to meet and develop relationships with local consumers. The family relies on the upfront cash derived from the advance purchases of CSA shares in order to make ends meet during the season. Thus far, members have been very understanding about the farm's difficulties and crop losses due to drought. Nevertheless, Danny's anxiety is growing because he fears he cannot live up to his customers' expectations and worries about jeopardizing his loyal customers' confidence and trust.

Danny copes with the stress by avoiding coming face-to-face with his customers directly wherever he can. This has meant that Catherine has been going to markets and making more of the CSA and restaurant deliveries than usual. One Sunday afternoon, an extension worker visits the farmers market and is surprised to see Catherine and the boys staffing the booth instead of Danny. He asks why Danny has not been around and Catherine, irritated, explains that she has had to step up because Danny is falling short of his responsibilities. From the brief conversation, the extension worker sees the exhaustion and irritability in Catherine's demeanor and wonders whether the family could use additional resources and strategies to help them find more balance and get the farm and their markets back on track. He plans to email Danny and Catherine the next day offer to come out to the farm for a visit.<sup>3</sup>

Danny and Catherine enthusiastically agree to the extension agent's proposal of a farm visit, but because of markets and work schedules it takes several weeks to get the visit scheduled. In the meantime, Catherine continues to take up most of the slack overseeing and managing the business. Working seven days a week between the farm and her nursing job, with additional duties at home, Catherine has felt overwhelmed with responsibility and is unable to see any possibility of relief. One Sunday morning while Danny is at the market, Catherine comes home after an overnight shift in the emergency room to find Michael injured from a tractor accident. She rushes back to the emergency room with him where the doctor identifies several crushed and broken bones in Michael's right hand from getting pinched between a cultivator and the tractor while attaching the implement.

Catherine's initial reaction is heartbreak and despair for Michael, but these emotions quickly transform into an intense anger and resentment directed at her husband. She is angry at Danny for not putting the kids first and his avoidance and passivity, and for overburdening her with responsibility, including several household and

<sup>2</sup> Discussion:

4. In what ways could Michael and Jack benefit from family counseling?
5. Identify new sources of stress for Danny.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion:

6. What did the extension worker notice from the encounter at the farmer's market that suggested the family needed help?
7. What are the potential roles of an extension agent in this scenario? What resources could an extension agent provide that might help this family? Are there others that this family might consider calling upon for support?

farm management decisions that should have been made together. Catherine wonders how much longer she can live like this. Catherine's symptoms of depression become debilitating, affecting all aspects of her life. Her carelessness and fatigue are taking over and she just wants to give up. She considers reaching out to her close friends within the community but instead chooses to isolate herself. She feels she does not have the resources to access mental health services even if she wanted to.<sup>4</sup>

When the extension agent is finally able to visit the farm, he finds Catherine desperate and worn out while Danny seems optimistic yet avoidant, failing to perceive the extent of Catherine's distress. The extension agent recognizes the stress this family is under and recommends they reach out to primary care provider for mental health referrals for family and individual counseling for themselves and their sons. Additionally, the agent offers to connect them with a colleague who work specifically to support beginning farmers. He suggests that this colleague may be able to connect Catherine and Danny with specialists who could help them re-strategize their marketing and communication with customers, and who may be able to help them develop risk management strategies that allow them to better manage drought or other adverse conditions in the future. Last, he recommends Danny and Catherine reach out to their networks at the farmers' market and in online forums to seek support and advice.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 Discussion:

11. What could happen in the future if Catherine does not seek help or address these feelings?
12. Who can Catherine reach out to for help?
13. Identify some of the effective and maladaptive coping strategies that members of this family is currently using to get through this difficult time?

#### 5 Discussion

14. How might the extension agent probe Catherine and Danny to ensure that he is understanding the issues they face holistically and is addressing their needs by making appropriate referrals?
15. Identify other intervention strategies the extension agent could use. Are there other referrals or resources that might help Catherine and Danny?



## Discussion

The discussion section is oriented to address key topics and is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possible answers and issues. It is intended to encourage individual and group reflection and guide discussion.

### The Family Vegetable Farm in Roanoke, Virginia

#### Identifying stressors

As beginning farmers facing drought and interpersonal challenges, several common stressors are likely to challenge Danny and Catherine. Both face the financial stress associated with starting a new farming venture and with raising a young family. Their avoidant communication styles contribute to marital stress that impacts both of them, though they may experience that stress in different ways. In addition to the stressors they share, each carries individual stressors that may feel more impactful to one of them than the other.

Because Danny is primarily responsible for both marketing and management, he likely feels more stress about his responsibility to his CSA and restaurant customers than Catherine experiences. Additionally, though they both worry about their sons using outdated machinery, Danny may experience guilt about asking his sons to do potentially hazardous jobs, adding to his stress. Catherine, who has a demanding off-farm job must cope with a different set of stressors. She needs to balance her job as an emergency room nurse with all of the duties she feels responsible for at home. She takes on additional work as Danny asks her to because of the obligation and responsibility she feels to her family, making it difficult for her to prioritize taking care of herself and meeting her own needs.

The intramarital stress, the stressors Danny and Catherine share, and their individual stressors could be mitigated through improved communication. Throughout this case study, it becomes increasingly evident that Catherine is suppressing her own feelings and needs in the service of caring for her family. It is possible that if the couple had more awareness of their own needs and expectations and if they had communicated those needs and expectations to one another, the trajectory of this story could have been altered and Catherine may not have exhibited symptoms of declining mental health. Indicators of declining mental health in this story include: Catherine's fatigue, her difficulty in getting out of bed in the morning; the careless mistakes she is making at her job due to her constant worry, preoccupation, and exhaustion, as well as unintentional weight loss, irritability, and withdrawal or social isolation.

## Intervention Strategies

These symptoms of declining mental health are likely what alerted the extension agent that the Catherine and Danny might be having trouble. He likely also noted and may have been concerned by Danny's absence from the market, which was a change in the usual routine. This, combined with the drought that was impacting production on all farms, alongside Catherine's apparent exhaustion and irritability indicated that the farmers may need some assistance, though at this point, it is unclear what types of assistance might be useful. The extension agent offered to schedule a farm visit to check in with the farmers and conduct an informal assessment to identify what services and resources might help alleviate some of their stress. The agent likely knew from experience working with farmers like Catherine and Danny that farm stress can contribute to increased marital stress; the loss of an off-farm job and the financial security it brings; loss of friendships and much-needed support networks resulting in increased isolation; and the potential for further declines in mental health. All of these factors can result in clouded decision making and mismanagement of the farm, resulting in the loss of markets or financial viability, sending the farm and family into a downward spiral. With this in mind, the extension agent was eager to learn more and intervene if necessary.

Once he has visited the family and gained awareness of their situation, the extension agent was able to recommend several resources and services that might be helpful in reversing their outlook. He recognizes that mental health counseling could help all of the members of this family. Counseling would help Catherine and Danny develop and model more effective communication strategies, be more direct and less avoidant, and become better able to tune in to their own needs. Additionally, counseling could help the boys understand and process Michael's injury as well as their parents' stress, which undoubtedly affects and worries them. Further, the agent is able to recommend several other resources and strategies the farmers might access to help them better manage their farm business and their stress. For the success of the family and the farm, it is evident that they must reach out for help in different ways to learn new ways of coping and communicating.

## **Resources for Additional Assistance**

1. **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
Available 24/7 to anyone in emotional distress or at risk for suicide
2. **Crisis Text Line:** Text "CONNECT" to 741741  
Available 24/7 to provide crisis intervention via mobile messaging
3. **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
NAMI provides free classes and webinars for individuals who have family members experiencing a mental illness. The organization also provides support groups for individuals who may be struggling with negative thoughts, actions, or specific diagnoses. Information on diagnoses, symptoms, medications, and treatments are available on the website, as well.
4. **Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services:**  
[www.dbhds.virginia.gov](http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov)
5. **Mental Health America (MHA):** [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA)  
MHA provides information on diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, payment help, and referrals. Users can find their local MHA office through the website. Also, screenings are available via the website to use with individuals and then decide on appropriate referrals for future assistance.
6. **Virginia AgrAbility:** [www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html](http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-150/AEE-150.html)  
Virginia AgrAbility's website provides a PDF document discussing what stress is and the other diagnoses it can lead to, how to recognize these, why mental health is important, and additional resources on where to turn.

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